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ABSTRACT

This paper describes stepfamily life; much of its content is derived from responses of 29 Australian couples who attended a six-session educational program on living in a stepfamily and who completed pre- and post-tests on marital adjustment and self-esteem plus a weekly problem rating scale. While the major part of the study was concerned with the issues and problems confronting the parents and stepparents, this report focuses on the problems faced by children when their parents remarry. Discussions center on typical issues of stepfamily living, citing results from the study and describing components of the program which addressed those issues. Issues covered in the report include: (1) lessening of closeness between the child and his/her natural parent; (2) feelings of resentment; (3) sexuality; (4) step-sibling rivalry; (5) behavior and discipline; (6) access visits, or times the child spends with the noncustodial or joint custodial parent; and (7) anger and sadness that the child may experience. A summary section suggests ways that counselors and other practitioners can help individuals adjust to life in a stepfamily. (NB)

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# Step-families

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John Gillespie

ONE DIVORCE can create two step-families, and as the pool of men and women available for remarriage grows the increase in step-families outstrips the rate of divorce. In 1981, 29.1% of all marriages in Australia involved one or both parties who had been previously divorced.

During 1984, 1985 and 1986, 29 couples took part in a research project on step-families, attending a six session educational programme entitled 'Living in a Step-family'. In the 1986 programme they completed pre- and post-tests on marital adjustment and self-esteem plus a weekly problem rating scale. The analysis showed the extent and severity of problems they encountered, as well as how and to what extent the programme helped.

The participants ranged from couples yet to co-habit to couples who had been together for seven years; people not previously in a live-in relationship to others in a third relationship; some in formal relationships, others not. The major part of the study was concerned with the issues and problems confronting the parents and step-parents but here we are interested directly in their children.

## Children in Step-families

STEP-PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF THEMSELVES are unrealistically high and they frequently strive to achieve a pattern that is like their original family but which is not suitable for a step-family. Children in step-families are rarely consulted about either the divorce or the new step-family so are frequently the silent partners in the parent's new life. The bringing together of people who have separate histories and different loyalties can result in tensions and complexities which were not found in their families of origin.

The most important issues covered in the study were:

the lessening of closeness between child and natural parents

resentment

sexuality

step-sibling rivalry

behaviour and discipline

access

anger and sadness

## Lessening of closeness between child and natural parent

REMARRIAGE OFTEN MEANS THE LOSS of a close parent-child relationship as the child must share the parent with a new adult and perhaps other children. A remarriage will often mean a move to a new location and this in itself causes all sorts of problems. My study found that parents were very concerned about the difficulties of building and maintaining a relationship with their own child, particularly if they saw the child only when he or she came on access, but they were often unable to see ways of improving the relationship.

I suggested that they should make an effort to spend time alone with their own child in order to demonstrate to that child their continued interest in, and affection for him or her. Often the child's peer group will provide the only stable relationship during this period. If the family moves this stability and the support that goes with it is lost as well. With a new neighbourhood comes a new and unfamiliar home, school, friends and so on. These provide their own set of problems for the child.

On top of all this, there is the problem of surnames. The mother usually takes the new husband's name and in doing so appears to have a closer connection to her step-children than her own. A discussion with the couples on the course on whether step-children should change surnames heightened their awareness of the children's feelings.

Teachers and other professional people need to be aware of the embarrassment or pain it causes, especially to the child, when a step-parent is incorrecty referred to as 'your Mother' or 'your Father'.

A number of people on the course said that as the access' parent, their role was generally confined to entertainment and excluded most routine caretaking responsibilities. They felt cut out from the child's day-to-day life because the custodial parent never gave them the opportunity to become involved. This often had the effect of the child believing that the access parent was not interested in his or her life.

## Resentment

STEP-CHILDREN'S DIFFICULTIES are rarely associated with a new family only. Problems go back to the time before the actual divorce. Most children have great difficulty accepting the separation and divorce though they may not show signs of it. Feelings of resentment and fear are often repressed and since they are never mentioned this is often interpreted as the children accepting the breakdown. The children often saw only glimpses of their parents fighting or arguing and because they do not know the full story, must fill in the blanks themselves.

Different children in the same family will have different perceptions of the situation. Because young children see themselves as the centre of the family, they interpret their parents' behaviour has being about themselves. They imagine the breakdown is their fault. The child harbours feelings of guilt which breed resentment and anger, and this in itself results in much of the behaviour adults find it difficult to handle.

The course attempted to alert parents and step-parents to the ways a child may have perceived the separation and divorce. Children who have not given up the fantasy of the reunion of the original family are especially likely to have difficulties when parents remarry. Children are not usually included in courtship and are forced into a situation in which they may not wish to belong. The parent may be happy in the new relationship but the child may see it as the total loss of his or her parent to the new step-parent leading to fierce competition for attention between the child and the newly arrived adult.

There appears to be a close relationship between the guilt a child feels and the fantasy that many have about their parents reuniting and 'living happily ever after'. Some children actively seek to make this fantasy a reality by creating havoc in the new relationship. A number of step-parents in the study gave examples of the techniques used by the children to try and get rid of the unwanted step-parent. Understanding the motive and taking action to demonstrate that the new relationship is permanent seemed to help the situation.

It is important that the step-parents neither force children to choose between themselves and the other (absent) parent, nor try to replace a lost or absent parent. It is also vital that step-parents and natural parents refrain from criticising the absent parent: children become distraught if their loyalty to one parent or another is challenged.

## Sexuality

SEXUALITY WAS A PROBLEM for some of the group but not for most of it. It depended on the age and sex of the children whether this was seen as a problem.

The children are faced with a completely new relationship between the parent and the step-parent. Before the separation, they were used to a distant, if not antagonistic relationship between their parents and are now faced with adults who are always touching, kissing and disappearing into the bedroom. Apart from the embarrassment this may cause to the child, sex becomes prominent in their thoughts, especially adolescents who do not find it difficult to imagine 'what is going on in there'.

The increase in affectionate and sexual behaviour in the home may contribute to the loosening of sexual boundaries. The only tie the step-family shares is social and there is the possibility of emotional attachments growing over time. Young adolescents with step-siblings may become very aware of each other sexually, and being terrified of the emotions they are feeling may turn to enmity towards one another in order to 'defuse' this sexually explosive situation. Attraction between step-child and step-parent gives rise to similar crises.

## Step-sibling Rivalry

FRICTION BETWEEN STEP-SIBLINGS was of concern to most group members. When two families try to integrate, difficulties arise as to where the children belong in the family. An eldest child may no longer hold his or her position in the family. All of a sudden the privileges that go with the position are lost. A young child may find another of similar age as a step-sibling, causing feelings of displacement and resentment.

Some children going on access were showered with expensive presents from the non-custodial parent. This caused jealousy from the home children who did not receive like gifts.

Another topic that created a great deal of interest with parents was that of the 'invaders' and 'invaded'. The 'invaded' being the children already living in the family home and the 'invaders' being those who come to the house for access visits. The territorial issue is not only uncomfortable for the 'invaded', but because the home is so important for security in a family, the 'invaders' feel a lack of security in what they perceive is a stranger's home. The home family may have a feeling of being the main family with the 'invaders' feeling a sense of inferiority. The 'invaders' often have no bed or place of their own and the 'invaded' must give up or share their room. To the 'invaded' their home is no longer their own. It is therefore important that the visiting children have a bed and, if possible, a place that is seen to be theirs.

Bitter rivalry and jealousy can arise between live-in children and visiting children. Visiting children have attention showered on them and the resident children are temporarily displaced. Parents are often afraid that if they do not make the most of the time with the access children they will grow away from them.

A number of step-parents complained that the access children were not expected to straighten up around the home, to do jobs or to have clearly defined rules. This appeared to cause resentment and antagonism as live-in children saw the visitors 'getting away with murder'.

New sets of relatives, such as grandparents, cousins and others can be a source of comfort for the children. However, unequal treatment and discrimination by these new kin can also give rise to anger and resentment.

It is especially difficult for children if their stepbrothers and sisters go to the same school and even more so if they are in the same year level. A child who regards the school as the only safe and predictable place in his life can find no escape from the pressures of the new family if his stepbrother or sister is in his class as well. It is a good idea to separate the two children in this case and either have them in different classes or, if this is not possible, send the children to different schools.

## Behaviour and Discipline

CHILDREN IN STEP-FAMILIES are often traumatised, suffering from repressed feelings and anxieties, resentments and recriminations about having been the cause of the marriage breakdown. These feelings may lead to lying, stealing and bad behaviour that is really a plea for love, attention and recognition. The parents on the course admitted to seeing similar patterns of behaviour in their own children.

Each family has its own set of rules to deal with unacceptable behaviour but unfortunately a step-family has two sets or more. A step-child may be subjected to two completely different sets of disciplinary action in the one home, depending on who does the disciplining, and a different set again when at the home of the 'other' parent.

Separation and divorce can mean a child is split between loyalties, by belonging to both parents. Many parents use the child as a pawn in their struggle, as they vent hostility towards one another. Children need to love both parents and to be loved, but some parents insist that the child love only one of them. Many families are in difficulties because the children do not feel that they are allowed to love both parents. A display of love for one parent may be regarded as disloyalty to the other. On top of this they are unsure as to what extent they are expected to love the step-parent as well.

The 'Living in a Stepfamily' programme attempted to alert its members to this dilemma and many found it a relief to know that they should not expect to love the step-children in the same way as a natural child. Likewise they saw the need for children to feel free to express affection to both natural parents without being made to feel guilty.

## Access

MEMBERSHIP IN TWO HOUSEHOLDS can give a child a wide variety of experiences and additional role models from which to learn and grow. However, many children find shuttling back and forth a constant disruption to social and homework routines and feel a lack of control over the situation. Each access visit brings with it pre-visit anxiety and post-visit depression.

Pre-visit anxiety is a continuum of intensity, with excitement and mild anxiety/pleasure at one extreme and frank phobia at the other, while the extremes of post-visitation depression can either be a mild unease arising out of the experience, or grief and mourning for the lost family. It is important for those working with step-families to assist the parents and step-parents find ways to minimise these stressful times.

One suggestion is to give children 'time out' when they return from access so that they can make the adjustment back to the household in their own time. Another suggestion is to encourage the adults not to discuss access, custody

or financial matters with the other parent at the doorstep. Access times should not be the place for parents to air their grievances. Children are happier if they retain a good relationship with both parents and if they are able to care for more than two adults without disloyalty being an issue. Most young children are able to respond to a warm and caring step-parent if there is little animosity between the natural parents. It is helpful if this can be pointed out to step-parents during a step-parenting programme.

Teachers need to be sensitive to these pre- and post-tension periods in children who are about to go, or have been, on an access visit. Monday morning after access weekends can be a difficult time in schools. Homework or projects may not be done because the child has not been in his or her usual environment.

## Anger and Sadness

VISHER AND VISHER found among children of divorces universal feelings of loss and grief and often these feelings keep reappearing. The children go through the mourning process, whether or not they show it outwardly. When parents announce their intention to separate the child is at first unable to accept it: this is part of the period of denial. This is followed by other stages of the mourning process. Usually guilt and anger are followed by despair and depression and the angry outbursts that results occur both at school and at home.

Those who work with step-parents should outline to them the stages of grief experienced as a result of separation and divorce and suggest ways of helping children through these stages. Many of those on the 'Living in a Stepfamily' courses stated that they found a discussion on grief particularly helpful.

## Summary

THE RESEARCH PROJECT showed how complex step-families are and how many problems are theirs alone. The roles of members of step-families are not clearly defined and this ambiguity means that some families need to seek professional help. A clear message from the study is that more understanding of the nature of step-families is needed by the general community, psychologists, social workers and teachers so that support can be provided.

We need to affirm that a step-family is a valid and acceptable family type. Teachers and schools have a vital role to play in the life of a child who is experiencing the trauma of entering a new step-family. It is important that teachers understand. The child may be ashamed that she is no longer living in a 'normal' family and will need assurance that step-families are 'real' families and are acceptable families.

Teachers may help through classroom activities designed to show that a variety of family types are acceptable. Reading to the class stories of children who live in other types of families helps accept family types. A genogram based on one of these stories helps the class to see that other family types are acceptable. The children could then do their own family genogram. Showing films of children who are living in step-families but who are doing the normal things children like to do, also helps to validate step-families. Make sure that such films do not have an evil stepmother or father in them as this would not be at all helpful.

Teachers can make sure that both parents have access to the child's reports, photographs and teacher-parent interviews. Parent-teacher evenings can provide the opportunity for adjustment matters to be discussed. Teachers should be aware that some children may want to buy two Mother's or Father's gifts in order not to offend either parents or step-parents. School record forms also need to be modified in many schools – they should not discriminate against these families by failing to provide room for the information about step-families (and thus by default not recognise them as an alternative family). The school, being sometimes the only haven that the child has, can assist in his or her emotional well-being by continuing to provide stability.

Counsellors and family therapists can help step-families in developing new communication patterns and styles. When two different families join together to become one, the potential for communication problems is great. Through the use of preparation courses or workshops and with the help of a trained counsellor, couples can work out their inevitably different values, establish family boundaries, clarify roles, develop faith in their parent-child relationships and accept (as temporary) the initial rejection of the step-children.

Counsellors and leaders of step-parenting programmes can assist in helping step-parents work out their relationship with the 'other' biological parent. It is also important to help parents to develop satisfying relationships separate from their parenting role. A good relationship between the partners provides the children with a realistic role model for their own future lives.

## *Notes*

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The full research project, from which this item reports a part, is
Webber, R. (1986) *Living in a Stepfamily: An Educative Program For Step-parents*. Unpublished Project, Monash University, Clayton.

The statistic on re-marriage is from
Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Marriage Australia* 1981, 1982.

The pre- and post-tests on adjustment and self-esteem are
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Renout, E. (1986) Separated families and children who refuse access to a parent. Selected Papers, *Foundation For Child and Youth Studies*, Vol. 33.

Visher and Visher who found universal feelings of loss and grief among children of divorces can be read in
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